

Purposeful Partnerships in the Community Interest

Partnerships and collaboratives are tools for group problem solving, decision making, and action. Some collaboratives are effective and dynamic groups who get things done in the community. Others are time eaters that block more effective use of participants' resources, time, and energy. Many collaboratives are effective but stumble over tough issues such as how to share resources or who gets the credit for the group's accomplishments. How can communities develop purposeful partnerships that benefit the community interest and offer satisfying experiences for all of the partners?

Know why the partnership matters

Partnerships pool the expertise, talents, energy, and resources of members. Collaborations and partnerships often develop because of a *compelling community problem* and a *crisis in scarce public resources* – dollars, people, land, buildings – needed to resolve that problem.

Teamwork among private groups, public agencies, citizens, and corporations has been a key to many successful community projects. Many policy changes and community interventions never would have happened if one person, one company, or one agency had tried alone.

Two main components of collaborations and partnerships in the community interest are:

1. individual citizens willing to take leadership and act as catalysts in involving other citizens and groups
2. established organizations, agencies, governments, and firms with specific goals and missions.

When citizens and special interest groups set aside their personal agendas and come together to engage in public problem solving, they are investing in their community (Figure 1). These

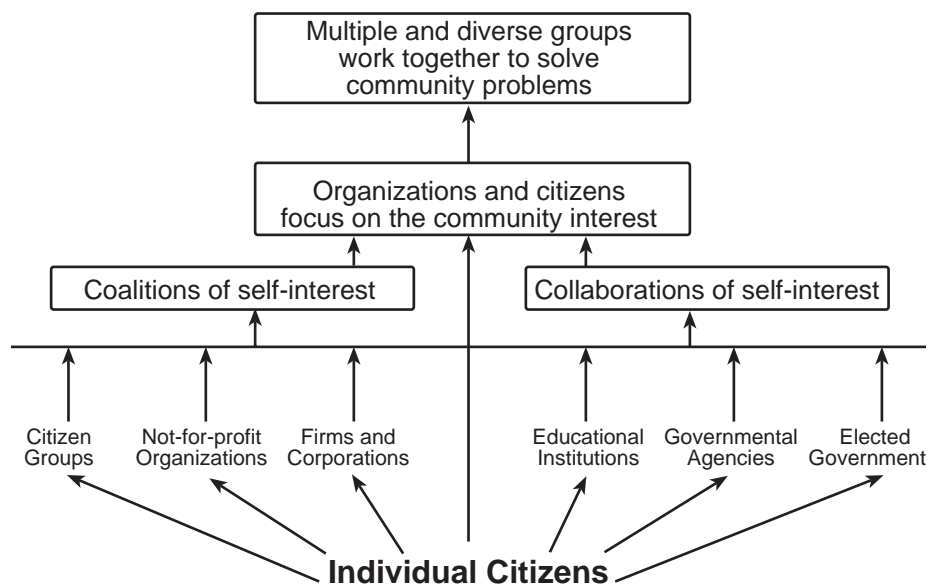


Figure 1. Building civic community

“civic” partnerships may focus on changing public policies (administrative practices and/or substantive policy) and/or develop possible solutions in response to the problem identified. The goal of a collaborative is to bring together the right mix of citizens and individuals representing specific group interests in order to represent multiple aspects of the problem and potential solutions. A true community partnership has a responsibility to be inclusive, working to assure that all voices are heard and involved in the process. When citizens, groups, public agencies, private organizations, and firms partner in the public interest around a common need, there is great potential for dynamic and effective community problem solving.

Take a look at the process

- Your calendar is filled with meetings, but your group isn’t moving forward.
- Meetings are busy and interesting, but it seems like nothing is happening.

What’s wrong? Use the *Diagnostic Tool for Evaluating Group Functioning* on the next page to help you understand the strengths and weaknesses of your group. Evaluate how your group is functioning by looking at different parts of the group process. If you’re frustrated, other members may be too. Ask each member to rate what’s happening in the group. Then have a “time out” group discussion about what’s happening and what to do about it.

If group relationships are strained, consider asking someone skilled in group facilitation to lead the discussion.

Do something

Not all community collaboratives and partnerships will succeed. Without a compelling reason for existing, collaboratives and partnerships are doomed to failure. Some groups lack leadership and passion; others lack financing, time, and talent resources. Some partnerships are so focused on themselves that they miss the community interest. Many partnerships are worthwhile and important, but simply lack organization or leadership. A good leader and guidance in group process can work wonders. If you’re in a disorganized collaborative, seek help. If you’re willing to lead, but not sure how, seek training. Your local cooperative extension educators and community development specialists can offer guidance and support. Call them today. Some collaboratives have a compelling goal but settle for mediocre results because the right people aren’t in the group. On-target problem identification and creative problem solving requires people of vision *and* people with experience – experience with the problem.

How do you know if you should bail out before you waste a lot of time or invest a little more in the group because you’re really close to success? Try the *Purposeful Partnerships in the Community Interest* test.

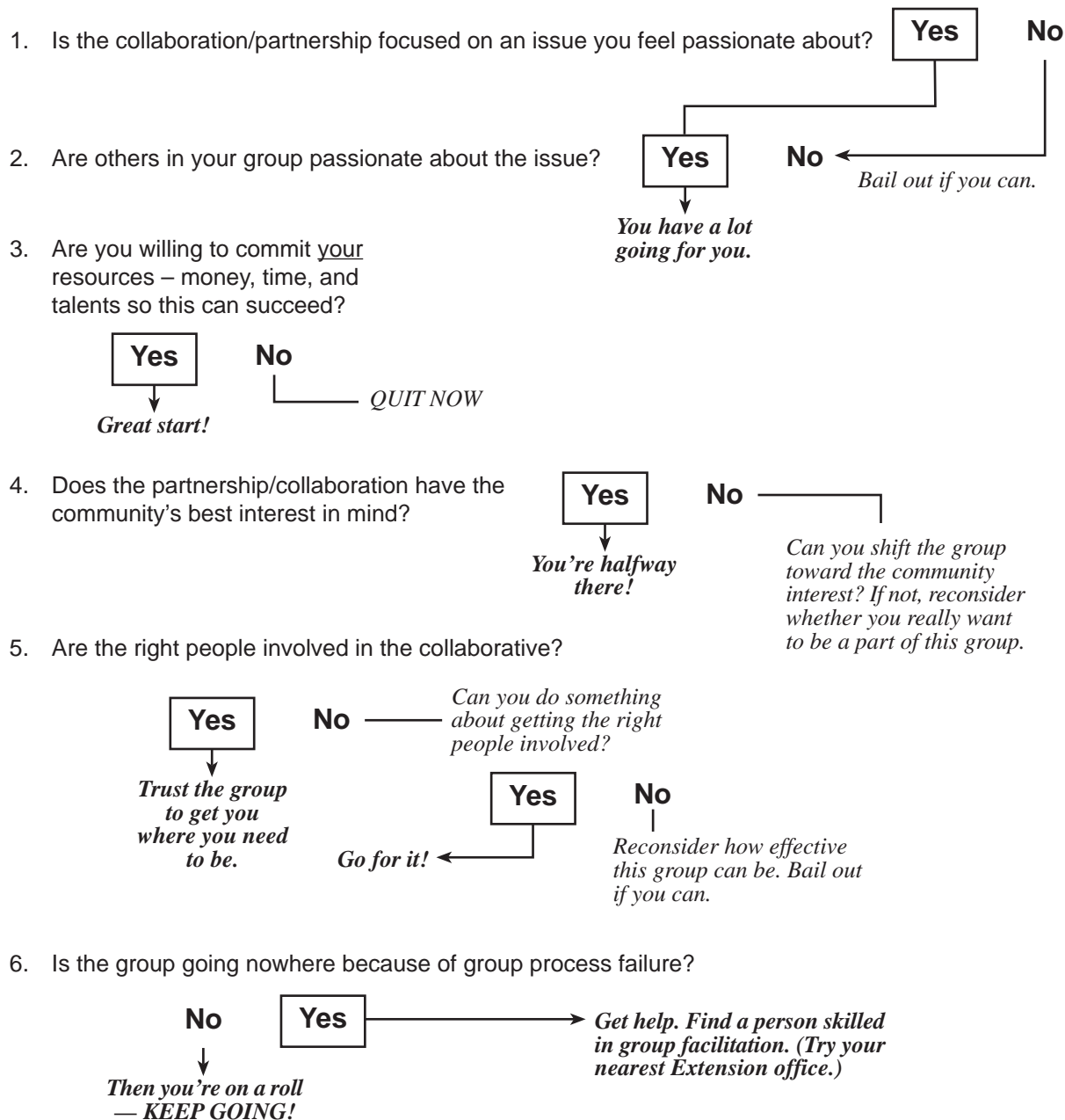
Partnerships and Collaboratives: Diagnostic Tool for Evaluating Group Functioning

Instructions: Each person in the group should indicate how he or she feels the collaborative is functioning by circling the number on each scale that is most descriptive of where the group is currently. Then, the group should discuss each item and what actions are needed.

Shared Vision						
We do not have a shared vision	1	2	3	4	5	We have a shared and clearly understood vision
<hr/>						
Goals and Objectives						
Members do not understand goals and objectives	1	2	3	4	5	Members understand and agree on goals and objectives
<hr/>						
Responsibilities and Roles						
Roles and responsibilities of members are not clear	1	2	3	4	5	Members are clear about their roles
<hr/>						
Decision Making Procedures						
We do not have effective decision-making procedures	1	2	3	4	5	We have effective decision-making procedures
<hr/>						
Changing Membership						
We do not have procedures for changing members	1	2	3	4	5	We have procedures for changing members
<hr/>						
Conflict Management						
We are able to manage conflict successfully	1	2	3	4	5	Conflict keeps us from doing anything
<hr/>						
Leadership						
Leadership is not shared and inadequate	1	2	3	4	5	Leadership is effective and shared when appropriate
<hr/>						
Action Plans						
We do not follow work plans	1	2	3	4	5	Plans are well developed and followed
<hr/>						
Relationships/Trust						
Members don't trust each other	1	2	3	4	5	Members trust each other
<hr/>						
Internal Communication						
Members do not communicate well with each other	1	2	3	4	5	Members communicate well with each other
<hr/>						
External Communication						
We do not communicate well externally	1	2	3	4	5	Our external communication is open and timely
<hr/>						
Evaluation						
We never evaluate our performance	1	2	3	4	5	We have built evaluation into all of our activities
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Based on Internal Collaborative Functioning Scales, p. 89, in *Evaluating Collaboratives: Reaching the Potential* (G3658-8). Ellen Taylor-Powell, Boyd Rossing and Jean Geran. 1998. University of Wisconsin-Extension

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Prepared by Lois Wright Morton, extension sociologist, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa

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